



Research Article

THE NEW-HISTORICIST INTERVENTIONS: A REASSEMBLAGE OF MASCULINE AUTONOMY IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S OTHELLO

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ABSTRACT

The article attempts to read Shakespeare in a New-Historicist perspective. We find Shakespeare's *Othello* as a literary deviation of history. Consequently, the text is decentered on a contesting principle. By contest, we mean a reference to Shakespeare's New-Historicist perception of history. Shakespeare contests and doubts the historical Othello who in fact led the readers into finding resemblances with King James I. In the process, even the Roman Emperor Marcus Salvius Otho Caesar Augustus who existed before Christ, comes into consideration.

The paper also negotiates Ferdinand de Saussure's precept of *signifier/signified* as stable. Our understanding of Shakespeare's *Othello* is that the *signifier/signification* of history is not stable. The Othello of history comes as improvised in Shakespeare's text which ultimately decenters the masculine into a victim. Eventually, we find the literary production of *Othello* as having fixed Othello as a metaphor of victim. He is a victim of political hegemony. Hence, the article has its main focus on a character scrutiny of Othello. In the play, he is found to have been lost his historical credible masculine which ultimately disintegrates the domestic sphere and in that Othello unlike his historical allusions, is a victim. The article is confined to a thematic consideration of Othello's character. A tri-dimensional pattern of existence has been evolved in terms of Othello's relationship with Desdemona, his State and Iago.

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INTRODUCTION

Othello, the character, is commonly considered as a symbol of brutality and an Icon of heathenness. A scrutiny of the sources, from which Shakespeare drew the character Othello gives a better understanding of the character. A New Historical reading untangles all the tangles. The story "*A Moorish Captain*" (1565) written by Cinthio. It tells the tale of Desdemona and a Moorish Captain deceived by his wicked Ensign. This clearly provides an assumption of Shakespeare might have taken the framework for his tragedy of Othello and his Ensign, Iago. In Cinthio's story, the virtuous and beautiful Desdemona is the only character to be given a name. Against the advice of her relatives, she marries the gallant Moor, not through lust but for love of his velour. Liviu Cuțitaru mentions this as, Anyhow, in Cinthio's story, Othello, Iago and Cassio are not given any names, being identified as "the Moor", "the Ensign" and "a Captain" respectively. Desdemona is still Desdemona. Except for his Arabian extraction, no other indication is offered by Cinthio in connection to the Moor's status in Venice.

We learn that he is appreciated by the leadership of the Dukedom for his military skills. The passionate love between him and the noble Desdemona is also mentioned. (67).

As mentioned earlier the name Desdemona was taken from *Cinthio* but it remains mystery that from where comes the name 'Othello'. A New Historical reading will give answer to the question. Scrutinizing the history results in Othello resembling two historical figures: King James I and Otho Augustus Caesar. Othello's character can be, presumably compared with Roman emperor *Marcus Salvius Otho Caesar Augustus*, who is called as Otho. Otho is, historically, a friend of Emperor Nero. Nero steals Otho's wife, Poppea Sabina, and sends Otho away to serve in a distant Roman province. Not long after, Nero kills Poppea. Nero later commits suicide, when an insurrection is building against him. There are still some similarities between the history of Otho and Othello. Otho's beautiful wife Poppea Sabina was stolen from him by Emperor Nero, who eventually killed her. Historian Mathew Bunson describes Otho as, One who acquired a reputation for wildness, using an affair with one of the courtiers of Nero to insinuate himself into a position of favor with that emperor, sharing in Nero's orgies and eccentricities. The two divided as Otho fell in love with Poppaea, whom he eventually married. Nero, too, fell under her spell and in 58, desiring to take her as

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his mistress, the ruler gave Otho the governorship of Hispania Lusitania. Poppaea did not accompany her husband to his new post, their marriage was annulled and Nero made her his empress in 62. Three years later he kicked her to death. Otho never forgave him for this, mourning the loss of Poppaea for the rest of his life. (403).

Shakespeare's Othello character fears that his beautiful wife Desdemona is unfaithful, and after his mind is poisoned with jealousy against her, he kills Desdemona. Emperor Nero kills Otho's wife Poppea. Nero is the Italian word for 'black.' Shakespeare's Othello, commonly believed to be a black person, kills Desdemona. Otho kills himself with a knife. His suicide is considered an honourable and noble solution to the brewing war, and it is celebrated as such. Othello also kills himself with a dagger. Thus there are certain similarities between the two.

Othello can also be compared with King James I of England. When James claims the throne of England, he promotes Shakespeare and his fellow actors, the most popular acting company at the time. They become the King's Men - the official court players for the king. It is important to know that the play's first recorded performance was performed in the Palace of Whitehall, in the Banqueting House, for the king himself (Vaughan 21). This was twenty months after James became king. As Ralph Berry puts it, "Within a few weeks of ascending to the throne, James changed the name of Shakespeare's company from the Lord Chamberlain's Men to the King's Men. That was unprecedented royal favour: Shakespeare had become house dramatist to the premier company in the land" (47).

The Historicity of Othello reveals King James to be a Black Israelite. The Genealogy from the tribe of Jude ends with Mary the Stuart Queen. Moreover, the word 'Stuart' in Anglo-Saxon English is 'Stewart' which means Black. The attitude of King also paves way to the authenticity of the assumption. Paul Edwards observes this as "the black people of James's court were possibly many of them freed from slavery when taken by Scottish privateers from Portuguese ships and the king always supported blacks." (6). There is a supposition which says Jews are actually black (Jaynes). When they were in Egypt the Moorish Egyptians and Jews they mingled and as a result there came a black Jew race. Elizabeth Caldwell articulates that the "Stewarts we see a careful preservation of this tradition, all the way down to King James I of England, who named his heir-apparent, Henry, after his father, Henry Stewart, Lord Darnley, husband of Mary Queen of Scots" (193).

Another incident which gives an evidence is, Queen Anne's order which makes Ben Jonson to write *Masque on Blackness* in which she, herself, performs as a black lady. Moreover, The Story of Othello analogizes with the real history of King James I. Historically, Desdemona and Queen Anne of Denmark both are detested by their husband. Though James does not kill the Queen, they live separately throughout the life, as per history. Queen Anne and Desdemona both spend much time in religious things. As we have Cassio in the play Othello, King James also has a friend George Villiers, with whom the Queen developed a friendly relationship. As there is Iago in the play, in real history, we have Carr the 1st Earl of Somerset. Whom the king loves more than his wife.

The Historicity of Othello can be negotiated with Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of *Signifier/Signified*. The History of Otho can be taken as Signified and Shakespeare's *Othello* can be taken as *signifier*. In the story of Otho, we do not see Otho himself as a victim but in Shakespeare's story of *Othello*, the character Othello falls short of his original historical figure. Thus the *signifier* does not go hand in hand with *signified*. Therefore, the history is not stable. Moreover, the masculine autonomy of the hero has been decentred in Shakespeare's Othello. Othello is victimised by his Masculine Autonomy. But, neither Otho nor James I was victimized in the history. Thus, the *signifier* fails to reach its *Signified*. Therefore, the sign (history) is never attained. The History of otho can be taken as Bricolier and Othello can be taken as Engineer.

The Character Othello is shown as a failure in Shakespeare's *Othello*. He falls prey of Masculine Autonomy from which his historical figures escaped. Though Nero kills Poppea Sabina, he is not victimized. The social institutions accept what he does. He escapes from the victimization. In the case of James I, he separates his wife Queen Anne from him, but he is not victimized. But, Othello is victimized by Political Hegemony. All the victims are victimized by the Political Hegemony. When Othello kills Turks and other opponents for the country he is exalted and praised. The country and social institutions encourage the act of killing when it comes to the matter of state. But when the same act is done for personal vengeance in the domestic forum, Othello is victimized. When the masculine autonomy was used for the state it was not questioned but when it was done for domestic reason he was considered as a brute, heathen and cruel beast.

Othello falls prey to the racially constituted Political System. He was the only black mentioned in the play. During Shakespeare's time the blackness was considered as the symbol of evil, witchcraft and ill-omen. All the blacks were portrayed as either evils or fools. Caliban of *Tempest*, Aron the moor of *Titus Andronicus*, Othello of *Othello* all were painted with the brush of white. He was victimized by the social structures. The masculine authority is questioned when racial pity is intervened. Likewise, Achilles was praised for his Masculine Autonomy but when he dragged the body of Hector in horse back the mob turned against him.

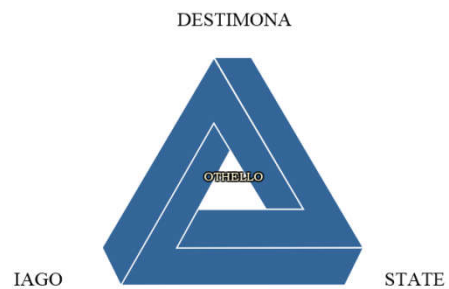
Here in the case of Othello, The same racial pity is provoked by the political system which privileges the white. The Political system of Venice does not allow a heathen to kill a Christian. In merchant of Venice's trial scene Portia says "when someone tries to spill the Christian blood, according to Venetian law, he should be executed." (Shakespeare, Merchant 5.1.154). Obviously, Othello is a heathen, a moor who is an Egyptian decedent.

The Political Hegemony of Briton is clearly understood by the privileges it gives to white. The laws are politically determined. Though Othello had killed lot of people for the country, when he kills a white Desdemona he is victimized. It is the male dominated society which taught him to kill and use his masculine autonomy. But, when he kills a white and used his Masculine Autonomy towards a white, the Hegemony turned against him and declared him as a victim. Even he was condemned by his maid Emilia on the basis of discrimination. "O the more angel she. And you the blacker devil" (Shakespeare, Othello 5.2.159-161).

When we observe the insight of Iago towards Othello, we could say that he represents the racial prejudice of the whites over the blacks. In the play, in many places we can see that he hates Othello to the core not only because of his position in the State but just because he is a 'black'. He mentions Othello as 'barbary', 'black ram' in spite of Othello being in a superior position. He also propagates the racial ideas in the minds of Roderigo, Brabantio and other Venetians. "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram. Is tugging your white ewe." (Shakespeare, *The tragedy of Othello* 1.1.97-10).

In the play, he is found to have been lost his historical credible masculine which ultimately disintegrates. Finally, when Othello comes to know the truth, he commits suicide. Which is considered as a failure of masculinity. Though, Othello committed suicide to prevent civil war his suicide was considered as an honor but in the context of Othello the suicide has become masculine failure. Unlike his historical allusions Othello was victimized by the Political Hegemony.

A tri-dimensional pattern of existence has been evolved in terms of Othello's relationship with Desdemona, his State and Iago. As far as his relationship with Desdemona is concerned, Othello loved her and he did not want to hurt her but when the time came Othello hated her and did not want to live with her. In the case of James I, he also loved his wife at first then he lived separately from his wife. In Othello's case, he was forced to live separately from his wife by Nero who wanted to steal her. In the relationship with state all the three were rigid. Othello sacrificed himself for the state. James wanted to develop his state. Othello has been away from his wife for the sake of the country. As Othello has lot of male companions like Iago, in the real history James had lot of male lovers, especially one Earl of Somerset. He was, like Iago, a hurdle between Queen and king. King listened to him rather than Queen. In the case of Othello he had Nero, his friend, who tricked him and sent him away and stole his wife. Thus History was improvised by Shakespeare in his Othello.



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